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Human resources management

Review of the efficiency of the administrative and financial functioning of the United Nations

Report of the Joint Inspection Unit on the use of consultants in the United Nations

Note by the Secretary-General**

Addendum

The Secretary-General has the honour to transmit to the members of the General Assembly his comments on the report of the Joint Inspection Unit entitled "The use of consultants in the United Nations" (A/55/59).

* A/55/150.

** This document was late owing to an unanticipated temporary vacancy situation in the submitting office.

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Comments of the Secretary-General on the report of the Joint Inspection Unit entitled "The use of consultants in the United Nations"

I. Introduction

1. The report of the Joint Inspection Unit was prepared in accordance with General Assembly resolution 51/241 of 31 July 1997, in which the Assembly requested the external and internal oversight machinery to give early attention to the practice and procedures in the employment of consultants and to report periodically to the Assembly on the subject. In accordance with article 11 of the statute of the Joint Inspection Unit, the Secretary-General is providing his comments thereon.

II. General comments

2. The Secretary-General welcomes the report of the Joint Inspection Unit on the use of consultants in the United Nations (A/55/59). It should be noted that the subject has been the focus of several reports of the Joint Inspection Unit as indicated in paragraphs 1 to 7 of the report. Furthermore, pursuant to the General Assembly requests, the Secretary-General has submitted several reports on the subject to the Assembly, more recently at its fifty-third and fifty-fourth sessions. Paragraph 23 of the report reflects the fact that in the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2000-2001, the total resources requested for consultants and expert groups was $18.6 million, and of that amount, only $10.7 million related to consultants. In resolution 54/249 of 23 December 1999, the General Assembly reduced the amount by $2,028,000.

3. As indicated in paragraph 5 of the report, four issues of policy are identified as needing further clarification and action so as to establish a coherent set of procedures and mechanisms — the methodology of needs assessment, geographical balance, transparency of reporting and respective responsibilities of key partners dealing with consultants.

III. Comments on the recommendations

Recommendation 1: In order to assure strict observance of the existing regulations, rules and General Assembly resolutions on the use of consultants, and, in particular, to enable heads of departments and offices to fulfil their responsibilities, the Secretary-General should instruct that:

(a) The development of the skills inventory of the staff should be expedited, and the consolidated database made available to programme managers (paras. 43 and 44).

4. The Office of Human Resources Management is currently in the second phase of implementing the skills inventory project. It is expected that this new initiative will result in an integrated system-wide service that will be available to the Office of Human Resources Management and departmental programme managers. They will then be in a position to review all consultancy requests and to ascertain whether the required expertise is available in-house.

(b) An electronic information system covering all the substantive programmes of the United Nations should be developed, as soon as financially feasible, and the information made accessible to programme managers (paras. 45-48).

5. This recommendation has been carefully reviewed by the Secretariat and it appears to require the establishment of a new and specific monitoring mechanism. A needs assessment study will be conducted by management, at the conclusion of which a proposal for the establishment of a new specific monitoring mechanism will be formulated for submission to the General Assembly.

(c) In the interim, the Office of Human Resources Management should review all consultancy requests to ascertain if the required expertise is available "in-house", and advise heads of departments and offices accordingly. Similarly, in the interim, the

Office of Programme Planning, Budget and Accounts should review all consultancy requests and advise heads of departments and offices in cases where duplication is identified with work or activities already done, being done or about to be done by other individuals, departments or offices of the Secretariat (paras. 49 and 50).

6. A closer scrutiny of consultancy requests as suggested in the report of the Joint Inspection Unit would require that the Office of Programme Planning, Budget and Accounts establish a new and specific monitoring mechanism. While there may be room for improving monitoring processes, the cost of introducing new mechanisms, as suggested, may outweigh the benefits. In this case, the possible benefits have not yet been quantified as there is no indication of whether there is a structural occurrence of duplicative consultancy requests. Therefore, given that heads of departments or offices also need to certify the need for consultancy requests, the current distribution of responsibilities and existing review mechanisms provide adequate assurance that duplication can be identified and avoided.

7. The division of responsibilities between the different departments serves as a first guarantee that there is not duplication across the Secretariat. The Programme Planning and Budget Division has an important role to play in this regard as it reviews the submissions of departments for the Secretary-General's proposed medium-term plan and the proposed programme budget. These two documents therefore serve as primary tools for avoiding overlap within the Secretariat inasmuch as the tasks and activities of departments are concerned. The possibility of duplicative consultancy requests is further reduced as the Committee for Programme and Coordination, in its consideration of the Secretary-General's proposals, pays particular attention to the avoidance of duplication. Moreover, the division of work within the Organization is reflected in the structure of the Programme Planning and Budget Division and its various services and units, which would bring to light any duplicative consultancy requests in the course of their responsibilities. However, a needs assessment study is being considered and, if necessary, proposals will be presented to the General Assembly.

Recommendation 2: The Secretary-General should include in the introduction to the proposed programme budget summary information on tendencies in the level of resources requested under "consultants and experts" compared with previous bienniums (para. 51).

8. This recommendation addresses the role of the budgetary process in separating resource requirements for consultants and experts. The presentation of the programme budget is under constant review by the Secretariat, the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions and the General Assembly, most recently within the context of the results-based budgeting proposals and the revised Regulations and Rules Governing Programme Planning, the Programme Aspects of the Budget, the Monitoring of Implementation and the Methods of Evaluation.

Recommendation 3: The Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions and the Committee for Programme and Coordination should be invited to include in their reports on the programme budget detailed comments and assessment of the situation with regard to, inter alia, the level of resources for consultants, both in the regular budget and extrabudgetary resources. Both organs should be provided with full and detailed information on the planned use of resources requested for consultancy, as well as the actual expenditures for consultants in previous budgetary periods (para. 54).

9. It appears that while the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions and the Committee for Programme and Coordination are invited to provide detailed comments and assessment of the situation with regard to the level of resources for consultants, no criteria are set out by the Joint Inspection Unit other than that the Secretary-General should explain why tasks cannot be carried out by existing staff. It would have been helpful if the Joint Inspection Unit report had addressed this issue further.

Recommendation 4: The Secretary-General should establish clear operational procedures on how the travel expenses of consultants should be handled in order that they do not distort geographical balance in the awarding of contracts. He might consider, inter alia, whether travel expenses of consultants should be budgeted as a separate sub-item of

consultancy appropriation, or eventually be a part of the overall travel budget of a given organizational unit (para. 71).

10. The mechanisms suggested by the Joint Inspection Unit can only provide the information on the basis of which the geographical distribution can be monitored. These mechanisms do not, in themselves, prevent such a distortion of balance in the awarding of contracts. While they could therefore be useful as a tool, they would not constitute an operational procedure. More in general, the requirements of geographical distribution — a human resource issue — should not be implemented solely through budgetary means, nor could procedures be devised before an understanding has been reached on what that distribution should be. It should be noted that travel costs for consultants would eventually be charged to the department that uses the services of the consultants. The cost would possibly become a factor in determining which consultant to hire if there were two equally good consultants.

Recommendation 5: The Secretary-General should study different methodologies that might be used to achieve geographical balance in the use of consultants, and report on workable options to enable Member States to make an informed choice between alternative systems (paras. 79-81).

11. The Secretary-General has noted this recommendation and will consider the options regarding presentation of data.

Recommendation 6: Pending the outcome of the study referred to in recommendation 5, the General Assembly might wish to request the Secretary-General to take the desirable ranges used for Professional staff financed through the regular budget as a norm for the geographical distribution of consultancy (paras. 82 and 83).

12. The Secretariat will continue to make every effort to recruit consultants from as wide a geographical distribution as possible. However, to apply the desirable ranges as a norm for the geographical distribution of consultants would not only necessitate increases in budgetary allocation, primarily for anticipated increases in travel costs, but would also exacerbate delays in various types of programme/project execution due to restrictions based strictly on the desirable range principle.

Recommendation 7: For information purposes, the Secretary-General should include in his annual report on the use of consultants a table showing a comparison between the mid-point of the desirable ranges used for the geographical distribution of regular budget posts (expressed as a percentage of the base figure) and the percentage share of each country in the total number of consultant contracts in the reporting period (paras. 82 and 83).

13. This recommendation has been noted.

Recommendation 8: The Secretary-General should ensure that information on planned requirements for consultancy services is made available in a timely manner to the Permanent Missions of Member States (paras. 84 and 85).

14. Efforts will be made to disseminate information on consultancy needs directly to Member States. The use of the United Nations home page will be considered as an option.

Recommendation 9: The Secretary-General's annual report on consultants hired in the preceding year should be expanded. In addition to the data on consultants by nationality as currently presented, there should be a breakdown of the data by developing and other countries and/or by regional groups. There should also be separate data sets for consultants and experts (participants in advisory meetings) with a breakdown by nationality and by source of funding (regular budget and extrabudgetary) (para. 105).

15. The Secretary-General has noted this recommendation and will consider the options regarding presentation of data.

Recommendation 10: The General Assembly should review and evaluate all aspects of policy and practice in respect of the use of consultants based on either an expanded report of the Secretary-General to be presented at the fifty-seventh regular session, or an in-depth review by the Central

Evaluation Unit of the Office of Internal Oversight Services (para. 109).

16. This recommendation has been noted. It would have been helpful however, if the Joint Inspection Unit report had given some specifics for the omnibus reporting which has been recommended.